UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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INTERIOR REPORTS FINDINGS OF WINTER WATERFOWL SURVEY

A survey of winter waterfowl habitat and its effect upon the distribution of ducks and geese has been completed by the Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. The Bureau survey, with assistance from State fish and game departments, other Federal agencies and private individuals, covered all important waterfowl wintering areas in the country.

Bureau Director John S. Gottschalk said that only geese, swans, and brant are counted as indicators of winter trend because summer breeding-ground surveys cannot be conducted for these birds since their nesting areas are scattered and remote.

A regional breakdown showed:

Atlantic Flyway

The majority of northern fresh water areas and some tidal marshes and bays were frozen, concentrating the birds. Food and water conditions were excellent in most of Florida, but a poor mast crop in bottomlands of South Carolina caused a mid-December departure of puddle ducks.

Scoter were abundant in Georgia and South Carolina, but no large concentrations of scaup were noted. Observers reported fewer ringnecks and scaup in Florida. Few ducks were seen this year in the Atlantic Flyway, but more geese were observed. Canada goose populations were steady, with more brant in New York, New Jersey, and Virginia, and more whistling swans in Maryland and North Carolina than last year.

Mississippi Flyway

All States except Louisiana were about like last year's survey. In southwestern Louisiana, where most wintering waterfowl have concentrated in recent years, food conditions in coastal marshes were poor due to high water during the growing season. Field-feeding species found good conditions in ricelands and swamps farther inland. For the first time in many years, southeastern Louisiana held more waterfowl than the southwestern area.

The Mississippi River and tributaries were low, thus reducing habitat.

Waterfowl were more concentrated in the northern part of the flyway due to snow and ice cover. The lack of snow from Illinois southward made waste grain available and surface water from rains helped distribute the birds. Generally, wintering areas appeared in excellent condition.

Fewer dabbling ducks were observed in the north, but more were seen farther south. Diving ducks decreased moderately in Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, and Tenessee, but increased considerably in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Arkansas.

The numbers of geese observed were about the same as last year, with fewer snow geese in Iowa and Missouri, greater numbers of Canada geese in Missouri and Illinois.

Central Flyway

Late December storms and cold forced birds into favorable habitat in New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Kansas drought forced waterfowl to concentrate on large reservoirs. Water levels were below normal in Nebraska, and most water areas were partly or completely frozen.

Availability of grain was restricted by snow cover in Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Wyoming. Food and habitat were good to excellent in Montana and in southern Texas, where grainfields had not been plowed.

Dabbling ducks in the flyway showed a slight to moderate increase over those seen last year, with greatest increases in Oklahoma and New Mexico. More divers were noted, mostly in redheads and ruddy ducks in Texas, indicating good conditions in coastal marshes and lagoons.

The number of geese increased slightly.

Pacific Flyway

Record rainfall in western Washington increased habitat. Natural aquatics were readily available in eastern Washington, but cultivation reduced the food supply, Food and water conditions were good in western Montana and Oregon, but poor in Nevada. The food supply was adequate in Idaho although water levels were generally low.

An early rice harvest followed by burning and plowing greatly reduced available food in California. Utah had poor food and water prior to the survey and inclement weather also forced waterfowl out. Drought hit southern Arizona and all lakes above 4,000 feet were frozen over, with birds concentrated on the springs and rivers in the north.

Dabbling ducks increased slightly from last year, mostly in California and Idaho. Divers seen were at the same level.

Excellent increases were noted in the goose population, with snow geese more than double last year's count, mostly in California and Nevada. The white-fronted goose numbers also doubled, while brant population showed no change.